

All Views Are Wrong Views

by Piya Tan

An argumentative brahmin (member of the priestly class in ancient India) approaches the Buddha and tells him “I do not accept everything!” That is, he has no views. The Buddha’s reply is short and exact, “That, brahmin, is a view, too!” (Dighanakha Sutta, M 74)

Whenever we say something (including writing it, or communicating it in any other way), we are saying that “I am right in saying this.” Even when we say, “I am wrong,” we are saying we are right. One of the most ironic statements we can make is perhaps saying, “I am not saying this”! And saying all this, we are asserting that “I am telling the truth.”

My point is that words tend to give us a wrong view of things. We can never express the whole truth or true reality in words. The moment we say something, we are leaving out what the words do not say. The problem is that words forms our most common way of communicating.

We can of course use pictures to communicate, but they have their own problems. A picture may say a thousand words. And that is just the problem! It is a 1000 words too many. There will be a 1000 opinions about that one picture.

Even when we try to say, like the good brahmin of the Dighanakha Sutta, that “I have no opinion on this,” we are not really telling the truth. For, that statement itself is an opinion! The real reason is perhaps we rather not say anything, as it is likely to get us into trouble. This often happens when we are confronted by a strong personality with closed mind or a person with a very negative emotion.

Sometimes someone may pick a single sentence, or even a single word, a single tree or even a single twig from a jungle of words and try to chop it down. They are really upset about a single remark we have made. From my years of public teaching, I find that such people tend to be intellectually inclined and have strong opinions. Unfortunately, strong opinions tend to be walled in by a closed mind so that it is closed to everything else.

There are a couple of interesting issues here. Firstly, the critic does not seem to have been moved by the rest of what we have said, but is fixated on that one particular point. A zealous young Muslim boy once attended a talk I gave in a tertiary institution Buddhist society. During question time, he at once stood up and challenged me that the Buddha was only a man, so how could he liberate us, and that his religion was the only true one.

Realizing that we could never reach a common ground, I told him calmly, “You are right!” He went on making a few more strong statements, and each time I said, “You are right!” In the end he was silent. No, I was not lying when I said he was right. He THINKS he was right, and I simply agreed with him. As he is unable to get into any useful dialogue, I left it at that for the sake of religious and general harmony.

If a Buddhist student falls into a similar rut of fixated opinion, and he challenges me, my reply would be that he has to ask himself really honestly and carefully WHY he asks such a question, or have such an opinion. There is so much he is able to learn from this self-examination.

My point is that our opinions change in due course. Over the last fifty years or so that I have been a Buddhist, my opinions of Buddhism have often changed, sometimes drastically. However, I certainly think that I know Buddhism better now than ever before.

By that very same token, I tell myself, I could be wrong or at best partially right in my current views. In time to come, I will know more than I do know. This is the evolution of our spiritual maturity. If we allow that we could be wrong now, we have a better chance to be right. We become more open to wisdom.

Then there will come a time when we really know we do not have any views. Unfortunately or fortunately, we cannot put this into words: it would be self-contradictory. When I say, "I have no views," I am stating my view! A samsaric tautology.

When we have no views, we will naturally be silent about it. I think this is what is meant by the saying, "Right view is having no view," which the parable of the raft tries to express in the Alaggadupama Sutta (M 22).

Oh yes, some might think that being silent is best, but this is problematic if you have nothing to be silent about. Only when you truly have no opinion, can you really be silent and at peace. For the moment, let me suggest we work at this reflection: Right view is not about who is right, who is wrong; it is about becoming a better and happier person.

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Dighanakha Sutta (M 74): <http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/16.1DighanakhaSm74piya.pdf>

2. Alaggadupama Sutta (M 22):

<http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/3.13AlagaddupamaSm22piya.pdf>

3. Dighanakha Sutta (M 74): <http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/16.1DighanakhaSm74piya.pdf>